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ABSTRACT

Human agency, the ability to organize and direct one's own behavior, has recently been considered, reconsidered, and even abandoned by many psychological perspectives. This paper provides a discussion on the idea that an intelligible concept of agency can be articulated by revolutionizing the perspective on the relation of the individual person to the social world, and by refurbishing the concept of individual agency while preserving what is essentially useful about it. It also discusses some projects generated by this approach in order to demonstrate the generative value of it. It suggests that humanists avoid an antagonistic stand and instead, revolutionize the concept and place of agency as engaging and cooperating with social constructs and resources. Humanists would thereby open their theories up to the extensive resources and contributions that a considered integration of the "social" construction of action and meaning (often presented as the "opposite" of agency) can bring to humanistic theories of human action and experience. (Contains 14 references.) (JDM)

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Agency, Constructivism, and Social Constructionism: Evolution or Revolution?

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I. Introduction

Human agency, the ability to organize and direct one's own behavior, has recently been considered, reconsidered, and even abandoned by a number of psychological perspectives, from social cognitive theory to psychoanalytic theories to social psychological theories. As the multiple discourses of postmodernism pervade psychology, I argue today that we can continue to articulate an intelligible concept of agency by revolutionizing our perspective on the relation of the individual person to the social world, and by refurbishing the concept of individual agency while preserving what is essentially useful about it. I will also discuss a few potential projects generated by this approach in order to demonstrate the generative value of it.

II Revolution in Theory

I must begin by making clear that this "revolution" in agency I refer to is a revolution in relatively high theory, a revolution in the way those of us who formulate theory view the concept of agency and use it in our account of human experience and action. This is not necessarily a revolution in the way people actually act or experience themselves, or in the way folk psychology accounts for action or accounts for a "sense" of agency. Whether a large segment of the human race is starting to experience themselves qua selves in a revolutionary way (say, in a fragmented, empty, playful, or unbounded way) is an open and *different* question.

What I am addressing is: what happens to a psychological theory when that theory takes seriously both the individual and the social context of human action and meaning construction? And especially: in what way is human agency still a viable construct if social constructionism is embraced?

III Definitions

It is also important to begin with a few working definitions, which may be challenged or revised later. Humanists tend to believe that *human agency* exists as an inborn potential to form and pursue goals, which give meaning and direction to human behavior and experience. In Joseph Rychlak's (1988) words, agency is "the inductive capacity of mind to organize or influence its experience in some way *from birth"* (p. 188). Within the structure/agency dichotomy in sociology (Walsh, 1998), agency is conceptualized as the actual activities of individuals which *produce* relationships and social structures, rather than being completely *produced by* social relationships and structures. I take agency to mean the contributions of a person to the direction of her life course, toward goals and by choice.

The *social* construction of action and meaning is often presented as the "opposite" of agency (Walsh, 1988). The "structure" side of the structure/agency debate refers to those social activities and patterns of behavior, which of course depend on individual action for their

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instantiation. However, in social constructionism, these structures take on a determinant power of their own, a causal force which is independent of the individuals in those activities. Such structures include roles, institutions, and discourses. A radical social constructionist perspective simply takes social activities and structures as not only the primary but the *only* source of the resources and meanings that determine human action (Gergen, 1985; 1997). For example, a person may have the *sense* of personal commitment to providing childcare by staying home with his child, which commitment organizes his perception and selection of career goals. Goals are often theoretically attributed to agency. Yet this person's goals may only be possible because of various socio-historical discourses that have for example differentiated parenting work and paid work, and because of culturally held assumptions which designate biological parents as the default decision makers about children's welfare.

The implications of social constructionism for theories of human agency is still very much at issue. Agency is worth maintaining in humanistic theorizing because of the rhetorical, explanatory, integrative, and generative moves this concept provides, that are not otherwise provided in contemporary psychological debate. It not only captures a phenomenological experience, but organizes psychological discourses around the contribution of individual level processes to the systems of meaning in which human beings act. My project is therefore to demonstrate how individual and social levels of determination can be integrated or interfaced in a theory of human action and experience.

IV Requisites of Agency

I would like therefore to posit several individual activities or capabilities that constitute agency as an intelligible, useful concept in dialogues about individual level processes. By constitute I mean that these activities are essential to us in speaking of an organism as agentic, and also that they are good candidates for actual individual processes that can be theoretically or empirically explored. By positing these individual activities as indispensible constructs in full accounts of human action, I assert that social constructionism alone is insufficient to fully explain human experience and behavior. However, I propose that while these activities make up an *individual's* contribution to self-direction, each of the activities can also be theorized as intimately interacting with social processes and constructs.

The first such constituent capacity is the coordination and organization of sub-personal components of behavior. In this coordination the individual seeks to both regulate *internal* experience such as cognition and affect, and control *outward* behavior, for example in coordinating motor behavior with visual cues in space. Michael Mascolo and colleagues (1997) have presented a growing developmental literature that demonstrates how "the capacity for self-controlled action plays an organizing role in infant motor development."

Such a capacity is important for the concept of agency in both child and adult action, for without such coordinated, organized behavior and experience, action for the sake of intentions would be impossible. This is almost a truism in theories of executive function and goal-directed behavior: the human as organism must be able to direct internal and external behavior into the patterns required for carrying out a plan. Thus coordination of internal and external behavior undergirds or supports the operation of agency, and contributes to the active, organized nature of it. Though this *capacity* may have its source in the individual, it is not theoretically opposed to the contribution of social constructs. In the developmental literature, a child's coordination and

control appear to be brought to actual fruition and full complexity only *within* social interactions with caregivers – the individual's first interface with cultural expectations and knowledges.

Now, coordination of internal or external behavior might be alternatively theorized as a somehow mechanistic process. In contrast, a hallmark of human agency is the individual's capacity to construct intelligible order and pattern from disorder and chaos. There is a supremely active process involved in an individual's ability to *make* sense out of the Jamesian "blooming buzzing confusion," to *render* intelligibility, or to *create* patterns across space and time. The active, constructive capability theorized by George Kelly, Alfred Adler, and many others is supported by a steadily growing body of cognitive, perceptual, and neuropsychological literature on individual behavior. Constructive capability is thus considered a cardinal feature of agency.

Like self-coordination, individual construction is also probably not a completely independent process. Cognitive schemas are learned within interpersonal relationships, and conventions of perception and even definitions of what *counts* as "intelligible order" are ingrained in, and perpetuated by, social institutions such as legal systems, churches, and academia. Yet humans, even at a young age, have the ability to seek out and actively formulate consistencies and patterns that cannot even exist for a less active organism. Also, humans seem to have the capacity to alter and adapt the social constructs and expectations they encounter.

This brings us to another individual capacity well-articulated by George Kelly: alternativism. Perhaps it is artificial to separate alternativism from constructivism itself. But I want to emphasize that in order to build a full picture of agency, it is also necessary to assert an individual's ability to imagine quite different alternatives to what one has already perceived or learned in experience of the social world. This possibility to differentiate one's constructs from other existing ones is also captured in Joseph Rychlak's (1988) model of oppositionality. By this he means humans' ability to create dichotomous meaning relationships among ideas and experiences, and to think of, or choose, the *opposite* of a given concept, based on one's commitments or current goals. For example, the opposite of black to the active mind *might* be white as conventionally given, or it could be yellow to a highway sign creator, or sunshine to a light-deprived Wisconsinite in winter (as I would know).

Alternativism and oppositionality are cognitive processes that, if and when they take place, free an individual from being completely determined by those patterns and constructs suggested by social conventions, expectations, and institutions. These creative processes mark human action as different from a mere mechanistic combination of behaviors or constructs to which they have been exposed. Alternativism and oppositionality are therefore principal constituents of agency. Again, these individual potentials do not guarantee that constructs or actions have a unique and originary source in the individual *alone*. While that might be the case for some constructs (e.g., the unique name a child gives to his toy), it is possible that actual constructs and organizations of constructs are joint products of individual and social processes. Balnaves and his colleagues (2000) have indeed recently proposed that Kelly's theory of personal constructs be amended to include a corollary that recognizes the importance of joint or corporate constructs. My point here is that, for a theory to assert a full sense of individual agency, it should certainly assert this imaginative, creative side of constructivism.

We cannot talk any longer about the individual processes that constitute agency without discussing language and symbolic systems. Structuralist and post-structuralist language theorists, including Sausurre and Wittgenstein, Austin, Chomsky and Harre', have argued that an existing language's lexicon and grammar, and a culture's language games, conventions, and narrative formulations make it possible to form commitments and intentions in the way in which we are most familiar to ourselves – that is, in and through linguistic symbol systems.

Yet from an individual perspective, there are again some capacities that must exist in the person in order for any of these language developments to take place. The Chomskian language acquisition device is maybe the most familiar such inborn capacity. Jerome Bruner (1990) also supposed that while actual narrative structure may be learned in interaction with others, the "push" to make the world intelligible through narrative is probably present even before symbol systems are fully acquired. It would not make much sense for me to claim that a language acquisition device or another heavily biological process is *experienced* by humans as agentic or intentional. However, it could be said that the contribution of an individual to her own developmental path, that is, her self-direction, is aided by her biology. This is indeed one way of considering the definition of agency: Peter Manicas (1997) draws on the work of Paul Giddens and Roy Bhaskar to claim that agency is not just conscious personal intention, but the option or capacity of doing things at all (p. 158). The option of using culturally-created languages is only available because humans are born with a capacity to learn language. Thus the individual must contribute to her own entering into the language community, and her *use* of language or narrative in that community may be theorized as agentic (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000).

Again, the actual practice of using language to express, construct, and act, especially for adults, will probably only be fully theorized by including social origins and social context of language. But an individual's contribution to that linguistic process may indeed leave a path open to speaking of an individual's agentic activity taking place through language.

V Abandoning some assumptions

I would like to suggest that by conceiving of human agency as a set of individual capacities that are interpenetrating with social constructs and structures, we make it possible to abandon a number of modern assumptions about agency, while the major sense of agency as self-direction is maintained. Most of these assumed qualities have been challenged elsewhere; I wish here to point out how moving agency toward a social interface helps to further these challenges and to free theorists of agency from the limits and confusions created by these assumptions.

The first assumption is that agency is "contained" in an individual and therefore separate from context. As we consider how agency is continuously and complexly involved with social context, perhaps even in part of its constitution, it may be less useful to use metaphors of separateness and independence to define agency, and instead employ metaphors of system (Mascolo et al., 1997), organism (Little, 2000), and ecology (DeGrandpre, 2001). The idea of significant interplay between individual agency and social constructs and structures does not have to reduce agency to a mechanistic response to situations, especially if the social and the individual are thought of as cooperative, rather than mutually exclusive domains.

The assumption that a self must be consistent and centered is also unnecessary: there is nothing about the idea of an individual being agentic, that is directing her life course, that makes it necessary to stay on exactly the same course or even that her reasons for changing course be

highly consistent. Also, *conscious*, *verbally* articulated knowledge of reasons and goals may not be completely possible and is probably not necessary for agency to be intelligible or exercised. Goals may be consciously formulated but forgotten, or symbolized in non-verbal form, such as visual images or gestures. A conscious "sense" of agency may not be involved in the myriad choices, constructions, negotiations, linguistic ploys, and self-organizing moves we make as we carry out what "feels" like everyday activity.

Finally, the Anglo-European cultural value of demonstrating agency through *control* of or *dominion* over other agents or the natural world may be productively abandoned. As suggested by a number of theories of moral, cognitive, and self-development, the primacy of individuation, individual rights, and hierarchies of power are not universal; suggested replacements are self-in-relation, ethics of care, and dialectic or dialogical selves. The formulation of agency I have presented here is consistent with these movements in its exclusion, as an agentic property, of radical independence from, and *power over*, others and the world.

VI Projects

I would like to conclude by discussing how projects can be generated using this formulation of agency. *Ongoing* projects that examine the interface of individual agency and social constructs and structure include Michael Mascolo's (et al., 1997) program exploring epigenetic systems of development, and Todd Little's (2000) focus on the interface between the self and context in his organismic approach to development. In sociology, Holstein and Gubrium (2000) examine the active, creative use of language resources by individuals engaging in discourse. Other theories consistent with the type of interface I've described are: some theories of self development, such as Frank Richardson's dialectic self (Richardson, Rogers, & McCarroll, 1998) and Edward Sampson's (1993) dialogical self, examinations of cultural constructions of the self such as those by Hazel Markus, Shinobu Kitayama, and their colleagues (1991, 1997), and Albert Bandura's ongoing discussions of agency within social learning theory.

This approach also suggests a number of new questions. For example, Bandura suggests that abstract social patterns determine an individual's behavior only insofar as that individual constructs rules through observation of these patterns. What I've suggested leads us to ask whether Bandura's cognitive rule formation is the *only* pathway for social constructs to interact with individual constructs, or whether social constructs might play an even further role, perhaps in organizing the development of constructive capacities themselves?

An alternative project is to explore how, if agency is in effect, those constituent processes I mentioned can specifically contribute to the *resistance* of a social construct that has high status in the community, or even a concept that is socially accepted as a hegemonic "Truth." For example, I'm currently piloting a study using a focus group format to explore how people agree with or disagree with the socially disseminated, implicit assumption that acquaintance rape is a matter of miscommunication, rather than violence or violation. Participants will also complete surveys in order to evaluate whether certain individually held beliefs or schemas relate to the assenting or dissenting moves or arguments they make during engagement with social constructs in the group discussion. Further research might productively combine this group process analysis with individual construct assessment using Kelly's role repertory grid.

VII. Conclusion

Let me close by reiterating that, if we as humanists see ourselves as merely evolving slowly from age to age, we might see social constructionism as just another encroaching threat to be fought in our defense of human agency. As it was with behaviorism and some forms of what we saw as mechanistic cognitivism, we would simply gird ourselves for another battle against theoretical limits on human freedom and individual will. Humanists are comfortable with that approach, and we've grown quite good at it. However, we can avoid this antagonistic stance and instead revolutionize the concept and place of agency as engaging and cooperating with social constructs and resources. We would thereby open our theories up to the extensive resources and contributions that a considered integration of the social can bring to humanistic theories of human action and experience.

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